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Influence Fades, Hostility Grows

Think Tanks Fight for Life

By Stanley Karnow

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A decade or more ago, few organizations in America were as influential as the Federal Contract Research Centers, popularly known as "think tanks." Sponsored by the Pentagon, these idea generators played a decisive role in shaping high policy and, although remote from the electorate, they were sometimes as powerful as any other branch of government.

Now, however, the autonomous non-profit brain trusts have not only lost much of their authority, they are struggling for sheer survival as they face an assortment of difficulties that threaten to put them out of commission.

The think tanks in their heyday laid the groundwork for the U.S. space program, and they conceived the strategies that steered the nation through the dangerous years of its nuclear rivalry with the Soviet Union. Their employees, frequently armed with only chalk and blackboard, developed revolutionary analytical techniques and new weapons systems, and their researchers produced thousands of studies, some with titles like "Communist Vulnerability to the Use of Music" and "Performance of Miniature Pigs After Partial Body Irradiation."

A dozen independent research organizations still operate on a total annual budget of more than \$264 million, most of which goes for weapons development research. But the activities of these outfits are being increasingly exposed to criticism.

Their principal patrons in the Defense Department, which once relied on them heavily for new concepts, have long had doubts about their free-wheeling operational style. These doubts have been compounded by internecine Pentagon feuds that date back to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

The military establishment's disenchantment with the think tanks was further exacerbated last year when Daniel Ellsberg, formerly with the most prestigious of the research groups, the Rand Corp., admitted to having filched the super-sensitive Pentagon Papers from its headquarters in Santa Monica, Calif.

Security Clamp

That incident spurred the Pentagon to impose a security clampdown on Rand and to tighten its controls in other research organizations. It also provoked attacks against think tank intellectuals as being too liberal, thereby balancing the image of them as cold warriors.

Legislative dissatisfaction with the think tanks, which had been growing for years, also reached a peak last fall, when Congress slashed the budgets of four key research outfits by \$8.2 million—about 13 per cent.

The cuts hit what are called the "paper factories"—organizations that essentially turn out ideas. They are Rand, which works largely for the Air Force; Research Analysis Corp., an Army affiliate; the Center for Naval Analyses, which is backed by the Navy; and the Institute for Defense Analysis which serves the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The budgets of eight other Federal Contract Research Centers were left intact. But these outfits, in contrast to the "paper factories," concentrate primarily on the development of sophisticated military hardware. The largest recipients among them are the Aerospace Corp. and the Applied Physics Laboratory at Johns Hopkins University of Baltimore.

Ominous Outlook

As ominous as the budget cuts was the view of the future of the research units expressed by Congress. In a appropriations Committee chairman George H. Mahon

(D-Tex.) asserted that "the time has come for the military services to begin phasing out the think tank operations." Mahon added that the functions of the think tanks should be taken over directly by the government.

Congressional hostility toward the think tank stems from various motives. Some legislators, like Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) see them as evil tools of the Pentagon. Others perceive them to be composed of dangerous "eggheads," while still others contend that their employees enjoy privileges not accorded to civil servants.

The belief that the research groups enjoy special deals lingers from past probes into their activities. A 1965 investigation of Aerospace, for example, revealed among other things that it was dabbling in Florida real estate with public funds and that it had spent \$3,133.03 to ship an executive's yacht from Massachusetts to California.

Legislative View

Legislators who have no strong opinions against the think tanks explain, meanwhile, that the idea factories elude them. Sen. Thomas J. McIntyre (D-N.H.), whose Senate Armed Services subcommittee on research and development is supposed to keep watch on the think tanks, says that it is "almost impossible for a small-town lawyer" like himself to ask the "hard questions" about the research units.

McIntyre told an interviewer not long ago that his biggest concern about the think tanks is a "lack of knowledge about what they're up to." Even with expert help, he added, the Senate could not adequately study the budget requests of the research organizations.

The men who direct the research outfits hope to regain their former financing—and maintain their freedom—when they confront congressional committees again this May. Yet their optimism may be un-

warranted, for the think tanks also have been tarnished in the public mind as cabals of Dr. Strangelove concocting sinister schemes to blow up the world.

This image, however fanciful, has been strong enough within the U.S. student population to prompt many universities to break their relationships with certain of the research organizations.

Links Severed

The Institute for Defense Analyses, for example, formerly numbered 12 universities as members of its corporation. But after students at Princeton, Columbia and elsewhere demonstrated against this link, all the universities have severed their formal ties with the Institute—although academic figures still participate in the organization as individuals rather than as representatives of their schools.

Some of the think tanks also lost prestige because of their dubious involvement in Southeast Asia. Rand, for instance, undertook an elaborate study that fundamentally served to justify the use of tactical U.S. air power in South Vietnam. The study endorsed the bombings on the grounds that peasants blamed the Vietcong for turning their villages into targets for air strikes.

Later Rand studies on Vietnam were far less accommodating to the White House and the Defense Department. In August 1970, for example, Rand specialist Brian M. Jenkins published a report entitled, "Why the North Vietnamese Keep Fighting," that effectively punctured official U.S. contentions that the enemy was on the brink of collapse.

Frank Analysis

A year before, when he was serving in Vietnam, Ellsberg wrote a brutally frank descriptive analysis of the failure of the South Vietnamese pacification program in Long An province. A Washington reaction to his study, he candidly disclosed